

Institutions, Inclinations, Interventions

Rereading Lipset's 'Social Requisites of Democracy'

Ruth Zimmerling

In this paper I will take a critical look at the state of knowledge about prerequisites of democracy within the academic discipline of political science. I will argue that over the past one and a half centuries or so, this knowledge has advanced less than one might expect, and will offer an interpretation as to why this is so and what follows from it for an adequate approach to improve the situation.

I. The comparative study of democracy *avant la lettre*

The – more or less systematic – comparative study of political systems, and particularly the attempt to discover prerequisites, i. e., necessary and perhaps even jointly sufficient, empirical conditions, of democracy, is much older than tends to be acknowledged in today's comparative-politics circles. Two examples may suffice to remind the reader of the existence of comparative studies of democracy *avant la lettre*.

(a) Consider, for instance, the following statement:

“Mexico, just as advantageously situated as the Anglo-American Union, has adopted the same laws, and yet it cannot get used to democratic rule. Hence, there must be a reason independent of physical factors and the law which makes it possible for democracy to govern the United States.”¹

One can hardly think of a clearer expression of what the comparative study of democracy is about. The quotation is taken from a work first published 170 years ago, in 1835; its author is, of course, *Alexis de Tocqueville*.

Toward the end of the first volume of *On Democracy in America*,² Tocqueville pulls loose ends together and presents a summary of his

1 Tocqueville, vol. I: 453 f. (all translations, here and below, are my own).

2 Ibid., ch. IX of the Second Part.

findings on the factors which, he believes, are causally responsible for the stability of a democratic political system – at least under the circumstances he observed in the United States of America. In his view, in the last instance only three sets of factors remain as possible preconditions for democracy. They are, to begin with, the two mentioned in the above quotation, i. e., a country’s material, physical circumstances and its legal order. But the case of Mexico is brought in to show by way of comparison that the conjunction of these two kinds of factors is not sufficient for democratic stability. As the missing “independent reason” which in Tocqueville’s view is necessary, and together with the other two factors presumably also sufficient, to make democratic stability feasible, he identifies a particular set of widely adopted and deeply rooted customs or habits (*mœurs*) understood in a broad sense to include all kinds of cultural phenomena: religion, political culture, traditions, public opinion, etc. – in short, “the entire moral and intellectual state of a people”.³ That Tocqueville is rigorously thinking of necessary (or: enabling) conditions becomes obvious in remarks such as that democracy lacks the orderliness of other systems “even when local circumstances and the dispositions of people *enable it to persist*”.⁴ But he did not believe that these enabling conditions come in just one fixed package. He argued for the more complex thesis that, within certain limits, there may be various packages of democracy-enabling background conditions:

“I am far from believing that [the Americans] have found the only form of government democracy can be given; but that in two countries the generating cause of laws and customs is the same is enough to make it immensely interesting for us to know what it has produced in each of them.”⁵

Tocqueville’s declared aim in *On Democracy in America* is to contribute insights into which combinations of conditions under which circumstances make democracy feasible, as he expresses in the Introduction:

“To instruct democracy [...]; to adapt its rule to time and location; to modify it according to the circumstances and the people: that is the first among the duties imposed today on those who direct society. A new political science is needed for a completely new world.”⁶

3 Ibid., vol. I: 426.

4 Ibid., vol. I: 366, emphasis added.

5 Ibid., vol I: 50 f.

6 Ibid., vol I: 42 f.

Democracy had so far developed without guidance from the insights of such a science, he thought; but he hoped that a better understanding of the democratic process in the US could be used to guide the process of democratization in France:

“Thus, democracy has been abandoned to its savage instincts; it has grown like children deprived of parental care [...]; and when it was then weakened by its own excesses, legislators came up with the imprudent project of destroying it instead of attempting to instruct and correct it [...]. The result was that the democratic revolution operated on the material of society without there having been the necessary change in the laws, ideas, habits and customs to make this revolution useful. So now we have democracy, but not what attenuates its vices and brings to light its natural advantages [...]”⁷

Hence, rather than providing *the* example to be followed by other countries with democratic aspirations, the case of the US was seen by Tocqueville as instructive merely concerning its framework of basic principles and, within that framework, as one possible way among others of arranging things:

“Let us look to America not to copy slavishly the institutions it has given itself, but to understand better those that are convenient for us [...]; to borrow from it the principles rather than the details of its laws. The laws of the French Republic can and must in many cases be different from those ruling the United States, but the principles on which the American constitutions are based, those principles of order, of balancing powers, of true liberty, of sincere and profound respect for the law are indispensable for all Republics, they must be common to them all, and one can say in advance that where they do not meet the Republic will soon have ceased to exist.”⁸

In line with these pronounced comparative objectives, at the end of the first part of his study Tocqueville comes to the moderately optimistic conclusion that

“The customs and laws of the Americans are not the only suitable ones for democratic peoples, but the Americans have at least shown that one does not need to despair of regulating democracy with the help of laws and customs.”⁹

7 Ibid., vol. I: 43.

8 Ibid., vol. I: 35 (“Avertissement” to the 12th edition, from 1848).

9 Ibid., vol. I: 459. The fact that here and elsewhere Tocqueville mentions only two of the three conditions indicated before – the material and the mental, or elsewhere the legal and the mental (cf. the quotation at n. 4) – should not be interpreted, I think, as one of his many “glaring contradictions” acknowledged even by his admirers (for the quoted expression and an extended presentation of Tocqueville’s

(b) Only two decades after Tocqueville, another early comparatist came to quite similar conclusions about necessary prerequisites of democracy: When *Juan Bautista Alberdi* formulated his ideas about whether and how the political liberty and stability that could be observed in the US might be feasible for his own country, Argentina, he mentioned the same three categories of causal conditions:¹⁰ In Argentina too, the physical conditions of the country were favorable;¹¹ and for Argentina too, Alberdi thought, the addition of a democratic legal order similarly to that of the US, though conveniently adapted to local circumstances,¹² would not be sufficient to achieve democratic stability. Like Tocqueville, Alberdi considered certain customs and “habits of the heart” as a further necessary

contradictions, cf. one such admirer: Elster 1993: 107 and 112–135). Rather, it seems to express, if somewhat elliptically, Tocqueville’s insight that what matters is not that each of the three conditions have some exactly predetermined shape but that, whatever their specific shape (provided they are within the framework of principles mentioned earlier), both the material and the legal conditions of people – i. e., their opportunities or, put differently, the external constraints under which they must act – must be in equilibrium with their mental condition – i. e. their dispositions or desires which are largely influenced not only by their material and legal constraints, but also by their customs in Tocqueville’s broad sense of the word, i. e. their “moral and intellectual state”. Cf. again Elster 1993 for a presentation of Tocqueville’s mastery of equilibrium analysis, particularly concerning the equilibrium of citizens’ opportunities and desires (for the former cf. both, for the latter specifically the second of Elster’s two essays on “Tocqueville’s Psychology”).

10 Alberdi, an Argentine lawyer compelled to leave his country in 1838 „out of hatred for tyranny“ (quoted from Ruiz Moreno, p. I), published in 1852, when the „tyrant“ Juan Manuel de Rosas had been ousted and a constitutional assembly installed to decide on the country’s future political system, a political treatise with recommendations for the assembly which in fact became so influential that he is considered the „father“ of the Argentine Constitution adopted in 1853 and which lasted with only minor amendments – though not always effectively in force – for some 145 years, until in the 1990s the Menem administration, bent on extending the constitutional possibilities for presidential reelection, pushed through a major reform.

11 Argentina was an extremely large country relative to the size of its population – and still is, although since Alberdi’s times its population has multiplied from “barely one million” (Alberdi 1852: 89) to almost 37 million in 2003, amounting to an average of less than 15 inhabitants per square kilometer (data taken from *Fischer Weltatmanach 2006*) –, but otherwise rich in natural resources and fertile agricultural land, without pressing border conflicts or incentives for expansion.

12 To reach his conclusions, Alberdi reviewed a number of alternative constitutional orders –previous Argentine attempts as well as those of Spain, Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Mexico – and finds them all wanting.

condition. And since in his view the existing Argentine population did not have these customs and habits, nor could it be expected to acquire them merely by education, he plausibly saw the only chance for the establishment of a stable democratic system in Argentina in the massive immigration of people who would bring them along from abroad:

“It is argued thus: If we educate our masses we will get order; and having order, we will get population from abroad. I tell you that you are inverting the true method of progress. You will have neither order nor popular education, if not through the influx of masses which come with deep-rooted habits of that order and good education.”¹³

This is so, he thought, because:

“Every European who arrives at our shores brings us more civilization in his habits, which he then communicates to our inhabitants, than many books of philosophy. [...] A hardworking man is the most instructive catechism. Do we wish to implant and acclimatize in America English liberty, French culture, the industriousness of the people of Europe and the United States? Then let us bring live pieces of them in the customs of their inhabitants and replant them here. Do we want the habits of order, of discipline and industry to prevail in our America? Then let us fill it with people who deeply possess these habits.”¹⁴

His constitutional proposals for Argentina therefore consisted to a large extent of ideas about the deliberate creation of institutional incentives to attract the adequate kind of immigrants.¹⁵ For instance, anticipating

13 Alberdi 1852: 58.

14 Ibid.: 56. Unsurprisingly, that he seemed to „prefer an English worker to a gaucho“ did not receive unanimous praise in Argentina (Sanguinetti 1978: XI).

15 “[T]he new Argentine Constitution must be [...] a constitution especially and directly calculated to give four or six million inhabitants to the Argentine Republic in a few years [...] snatching its inhabitants from Europe and assimilating them to our population”, he declared without inhibition, pointing to California, “improvised in only four years time”, as the great example which “has made the fairytale come true and has made known the true formative law of the new states in America; bringing large chunks of already formed people from abroad, accomodating them in the nation and giving them the American flag.” Against contemporary interpretations, he liked to think that “It is not the gold that has worked this miracle in North America: it is freedom”, but he did not insist too much on this: “And if it should be true that the gold has contributed to the realization of this miracle, all the better for the truth of the system we are offering, that wealth is the fairy that improvises peoples” (Alberdi 1852: 97). – The “improvisation” of the Argentine population through massive immigration did, in fact, not succeed as he envisioned it: massive immigration was achieved, but not of Anglo-Saxon protestants; so Argentina did not come to provide a real testcase for Alberdi’s theses about the cultural prerequisites of democracy.

in a way Max Weber's thesis about the positive effects of a "protestant ethos", Alberdi warned:

"To call the anglo-saxon race as well as the people of Germany, Sweden and Switzerland, but to prohibit the practice of their religion is just like calling them only rhetorically [...] to ban the apostate religions from South America is to ban the English, the Germans, the Swiss, the North Americans who are not catholic, that is, those immigrants this continent needs most. To bring them here without their religion means to bring them here without the conditioning factor that makes them what they are [...]"¹⁶

But Alberdi did not forget that if they are to be induced to leave their countries of origin potential immigrants will want more than the right to practice their religion, however important that may be to them. He also considered more material incentives, recommending to grant them civil rights similar to those of national citizens, and opportunities to enter the "secondary ranks" of the civil service – "for the benefit of the country which will thus profit from their skills more than for their own benefit".¹⁷ But most importantly, he emphasized the importance of professional freedom and the effective guarantee of property rights:

"As the development and exploitation of the elements of wealth contained in the Argentine Republic is [...] the most energetic incentive for the foreign immigration it needs, its Constitution must recognize among its great objectives the inviolability of the right to property and the complete freedom of work and industry. To promise these guarantees and put them into writing is not to implement them. [...] Serious constitutions must not consist of promises, but of guarantees of execution. Thus, the Argentine Constitution must not content itself with declaring the right to private property inviolable; it must guarantee the reform of all civil laws and all colonial directives still in force despite the Republic that make this right illusory and nominal."¹⁸

Concerning the legal order, he not only paid attention to the problem that the laws effectively in force may not coincide with the laws in the legal codes, as this last quotation shows, but also to potential problems with its internal consistency, with the mutual compatibility of institutions. A decade after his constitutional recommendations, when despite the new constitution Argentina was plagued by constant internal strife, he published a study "On Anarchy and its two principal causes [...] in the

16 Ibid.: 60 f.

17 Ibid.: 90.

18 Ibid.: 91.

Argentine Republic” (1862). There he exposed the specific institutional arrangement of the Argentine federation as fundamentally flawed since concerning the status of the city of Buenos Aires “the [national and the provincial] constitutions exclude and repeal each other because they regulate the same subject”, with the result that the whole institutional structure “is organized permanently by contradictory basic laws which make anarchy an inevitable and normal state, and peace a miraculous contingency”.¹⁹ The details of the case need not concern us here; what is of interest is that the author very clearly diagnoses the institutional inconsistency, argues that it, rather than other features, is the cause of the country’s major political problems,²⁰ and then explores systematically the logically possible and the actually feasible solutions to this problem, in the light of various kinds of relevant constraining and enabling circumstances such as political and economic interests and powers, national legal traditions, and even recent provisions of international law which he recognizes as potential tools in forging a stable solution.

He was, however, also keenly aware of the fact that institutional voluntarism finds its limits in factual circumstances – the hard facts of physical and geographical conditions, but also the lasting social effects, obstinate habits and traditions of institutional history which “no constitutional assembly will be able to make disappear instantly by decrees or constitutions”.²¹ In modern parlance, one could say that the basic ideas of “path-dependency” and “feasibility studies” were not unknown to Alberdi.

II. The comparative study of democracy in the 20th century

When political scientists nowadays speak of the pioneers of the comparative study of democracy, they don’t usually think of Tocqueville

19 Alberdi 1862: VIII.

20 Ibid.: 21 f.: “There is no need to search elsewhere for the causes of the anarchy and civil war which constantly plague the Argentine peoples. They do not come from the race, nor from the republican form of government. We do not intend to sanctify the republic, but this is not the time to impute to it the responsibility of an affliction of which more immediate causes are evident. [...] And this does also not come from the nature of the population, nor from the state of its culture. [...] If the Argentines were angels, if they were as sophisticated as the inhabitants of London, Paris or Geneva, the manifestations of their indignation against the abuse they are subjected to would only be the more violent.”

21 Alberdi 1852: ch. XV, here p. 85.

– who is, of course, acknowledged and admired as a “classic” and used as a provider of decorative quotes, but surely not seen as a serious contender in the field of current comparative politics –, and much less of Alberdi, not to mention still earlier or more ‘exotic’ scholars. They rather focus on the period after World War II, when from an academic point of view the discipline of political science became more firmly established and in the process developed its internal differentiation into several sub-disciplines, while from a political point of view a great number of new states appeared on the international scene many of which, freshly released from colonial tutelage, were endowed with highly precarious political orders.

The stable democratization of these new states as well as of the defeated axis powers was an important concern particularly in the “Western” part of the world, and the field of comparative politics therefore had a topic that for many years – not least because of its obvious relevance for practical international relations which at the time were primarily marked by the Cold War – kept a large group of scholars occupied and fed.

This process of the differentiation and professionalization of the academic discipline of political science was accompanied, however, by a peculiar and in my view not very fortunate development: the treatment of Tocqueville’s and Alberdi’s three bundles of factors – external circumstances, legal order and social customs – drifted apart:

* Scholars who continued to pursue what in German, significantly, was and sometimes still is called *Vergleichende Regierungslehre* (meaning basically Comparative Government, but with the word *Lehre* carrying a strong connotation of doctrinal teaching) concentrated on **institutions**, studying the various ideal types of democratic systems; and if concerned with empirical questions at all, they looked at the political and legal order almost exclusively by way of the texts of constitutions and statutes and the manifest organizational elements of political systems.²²

With such an approach – which was soon considered old-fashioned and obsolete by their more ‘modern’, empirically oriented colleagues –, the members of this group could hardly be expected to solve Tocqueville’s puzzle about the differences in the operation of the governments of the US and Mexico despite their very similar legal orders.

22 In Germany, representatives of this current often had a strong affinity to philosophy and jurisprudence and felt uncomfortable under the roof of the newly forming Faculties of Social Sciences.

* Entirely different directions were taken by the large group of scholars who approached the study of democracy or political 'development' from an empirical perspective.

(i) Within this group, those particularly concerned with the empirical prerequisites of *democracy* gave special attention to the factors Tocqueville had subsumed under the label of *mœurs*, that is, to people's **inclinations** of all sorts (political attitudes, dispositions to comply with legal or social norms, belief in religious authority, different sets of interests resulting from different social positions, and the like). In other words, they specialized in political sociology. This was the context in which the concept of the political culture of a society was formed and one particular type of political culture, the so-called "civic culture", identified as supposedly being especially favorable for democratic stability. One question in particular was of interest to these scholars, namely, whether the political cultures in the formerly fascist states on which a democratic system had been imposed by the Western allies was changing in the desired direction, thus consolidating those democracies. With time, however, these "political sociologists" have tended to forget about the questions of democratic prerequisites, of possible ways of democratization or of improving the quality of existing democracies, specializing instead in the investigation of the internal operations, the "politics", of democratic systems that are considered as consolidated to the point of no return.

(ii) By contrast, a second group of early empirically minded comparative-democracy scholars – those particularly concerned with *development* – focused on the newly independent states which were mostly struggling not only with political, but also with severe economic problems. Thus, a primary concern of investigations in this area was, almost naturally, the task to discover possible relationships between political and economic development. Here, then, we find mainly Tocqueville's third set of factors, that of **interventions** of external factors, particularly those resulting from economic circumstances, in the development of a democratic political system.

This is certainly an extremely rough sketch; and I do not mean to assert that scholars belonging to one or the other of these different camps always completely ignored the other aspects and factors. But I think in its contours the sketch is basically correct. Since the very beginning of the post-war era, the analysis of the conception as well as the investigation of the conditions for the emergence, success and stability of democracy has been highly fragmented. In particular, the empirical study of democ-

racy (in both versions mentioned above) was so strongly marked by its behavioralist beginnings that it often lost sight of the institutional level – primarily, of the effects a given institutional environment may have on the chances for the implementation and the stable and effective operation of certain other institutions. And this fragmentation continues to exist:

* Today, the worlds of *normatively* oriented theorists of democracy interested primarily in questions of justification, and of *empirically* oriented theorists of democracy aiming at causal explanation seem to be disconcertingly far apart. They constitute different circles with very little overlap – in terms of personnel, but also and more importantly in terms of substantive content.²³

* No less disconcerting are the deep trenches within empirical comparative democracy, dividing those who investigate the so-called “core democracies” of Western Europe and the Anglo-Saxon countries, nowadays also called the “OECD world”, on the one hand, from those who focus on so-called transition or transformation countries or on the democratization of the international system, on the other.

This seems unfortunate, as all sides are supposedly interested in and speaking of the same type of political system. Hence, at least concerning the never-ending *conceptual* disagreements, normative and empirical theory could and should inform each other.²⁴ But also with a view towards *empirical* insights there seem to be good reasons to bridge those trenches dividing the study of democracy in different kinds of societies – those of the formerly so-called First, Second, and Third World as well as at the

23 This is so despite the fact that, on the one hand, many empiricists neither can nor intend to hide that their main motivation for investigating democracy is their belief that this a, if not *the* only, legitimate political system and that they therefore consider democracy to be desirable; and that, on the other hand, many normative theorists do not mean to pursue a glass-bead game, but claim practical relevance for their thoughts.

24 After all, even the best empirical intentions will at best be able to cover up, but not to eliminate the normative connotations of “democracy” (Dahl’s failure to convince the discipline to shed those normative connotations by adopting the neologism “polyarchy” is symptomatic); and, on the other side, the most subtle and elevating theoretical reflections on the institutional consequences of these normative foundations easily overlook the much less subtle normative problems and deficits of really existing political systems if they are not time and again pulled back down from the lofty heights of ideal theory to the hard rocks of political reality.

subnational, national and supranational level – not least because from a methodological point of view in a field with necessarily small numbers of cases the qualitative analysis of “most different” cases seems to be a particularly promising approach.

If my perception is correct, however, the study of developing and transition countries has recently shown some moves in the right direction, i. e. towards the consideration of the findings in the other groups, over the past few years. Partly because of a widespread, though not always very profound, reception of Douglass North’s ideas on path-dependency, it has, for instance, once again become common wisdom that “institutions matter”, and in fact institutions (particularly, legal systems and their efficacy or inefficacy, but also the advantages and disadvantages of parliamentary or presidential and of unitary or federal structures under certain social environmental conditions, and more generally the relationship between democracy and the “rule of law”) are increasingly objects of academic concern.²⁵

By contrast, in the comparative study of “established” democracies, the consideration of insights about developing or transition countries – i. e. the comparative view beyond the narrow boundaries of those systems one knows usually from first-hand experience and whose features one therefore has a tendency to take almost as self-evident or quasi-natural – remains much less common. In fact, it sometimes seems that the study of non-OECD systems and the use of arguments based on the evidence from such countries is increasingly considered as at best exotic, but generally as irrelevant and even as not quite respectable.

25 To some extent, this seems to be due to an infiltration of legal philosophers into the fortresses of political development studies. At least one prominent transition scholar whose work is highly influential in the field, Guillermo O’Donnell, has recently begun to remember what he learned in his beginnings as a law student and to pay more attention than before to the role of the legal order in democratic transition and consolidation. For another instructive and inspiring example of how the comparative study of political systems can be enriched by considerations based on insights from legal theory, cf. Ernesto Garzón Valdés’s conceptual and empirically comparative study of the stability of political systems (1988). It is perhaps no mere coincidence that both these scholars come from Latin America where legal philosophy has traditionally been and continues to be academically much stronger than political science.

III. Lipset's "Social Requisites of Democracy"

This may in part be a consequence of the – I think, undeniable – fact that the study of the political systems of developing or transition countries has in the past not always been up to the theoretical and methodological state of the art of empirical social science. The paradigmatic case for this type of problems is probably the approach to the comparative study of democracy known as "modernization theory".²⁶ In political science, its path begins prominently with Lipset's reflections on the "Social Requisites of Democracy", first published in 1959. What Lipset conjectured to be the most important prerequisites was announced in the subtitle of his paper: „Economic Development and Political Legitimacy“.

Despite the fact that Lipset explicitly expresses his awareness of methodological issues and even supplies a "methodological appendix" where he explains his understanding of the role of statistical correlations and "multivariate causation", this early essay suffers considerably from vagueness and inconsistencies. Let me mention only a few of them:

* Lipset's concept of democracy is extremely slim. He defines it merely as "a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials". At the same time, however, he also asserts that „democracy is [...] a complex of characteristics which may be ranked in many different ways“. ²⁷ How this assertion fits to the definition remains unexplained.

* Besides, according to Lipset, this concept of democracy "implies a number of specific conditions" which he enumerates. What he does not point out is that apparently not all three allegedly implied conditions have the same status. Two of them are implied analytically, i. e. they follow by definition from his concept of democracy itself: the conditions that in a democracy at any point in time there must be some who rule and also some who don't, but who may possibly become rulers in the future (and, one might add, also some who have been rulers in the past).

²⁶ Its competitor, *dependencia* theory, could serve just as well to illustrate the methodological and theoretical shortcomings of traditional development studies; but I will not say anything about it here. Because of its current revival, on which I will have to say more below, the deficits of modernization theory are more relevant to the point I wish to make. In the present context, I am also not interested in the well-known controversy between modernization and dependency theory.

²⁷ Lipset 1959: 71 and 73.

The foundation of the third condition, however, is kept in the dark. It is not clear why democracy in Lipset's sense should imply a "system of beliefs" which legitimizes the democratic system and at the same time also specifies the institutions thus "legitimized, *i. e.*, accepted as proper by all". He does not tell us whether he means to say that this is also an analytically necessary or perhaps an empirically found condition. Besides stating that "The need for these conditions is clear", he adds as explanation only a sentence saying that the compliance of subjects with government decisions and the recognition by those in power of the rights of their subjects must be supported by a corresponding "value system".²⁸ An explanation of how this value system relates to his complex condition concerning the legitimizing belief system is not given.

* Moreover, the exact meaning of Lipset's "hypotheses" about the causal connections between democracy, or democratic stability, and economic development, on the one hand, and "legitimacy",²⁹ on the other, also remains unclear. Rather than about necessary or sufficient conditions for (stable) democracy, they seem to be assertions about conditions which are merely thought to "support" democracy in some vague sense.³⁰

* Finally, Lipset has a tendency to identify statistical correlations with causal relations without further argument; but he also warns that "high correlations which appear in the data [...] must not be overly stressed, since unique events may account for *either* the persistence *or* the failure of democracy in any particular society"³¹ – which would seem to make any search for explanatory generalizations futile from the start.

In view of these deficits, I think one must conclude that Lipset did not get very far beyond Tocqueville and Alberdi: He considers only two of

28 Ibid.: 71.

29 Lipset does not distinguish between the legitimacy of a political system and the subjective "legitimacy beliefs" (Weber) of its citizens or other observers; but it is obvious throughout that when he says "legitimacy" what he actually means are those beliefs.

30 Ibid.: 72: „This paper is primarily concerned with explicating the social conditions which serve to *support* a democratic political system [...]“. The "hypothesis" about economic conditions seems to be the formulation "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy" (ibid.: 75); about the "legitimacy" condition for democracy I was unable to find any identifiable hypothesis although the entire section III of the essay is dedicated to "Legitimacy and Democracy".

31 Ibid.: 72.

their three categories of causal factors (economic conditions, and beliefs about political values and legitimacy which can be understood as part of Tocqueville's *mœurs*); he is hardly less inconsistent and vague than they were; and the "added value" of modern methods of comparative analysis in his contribution is, at best, modest.

IV. The recent revival of the modernization-theoretical approach

But, someone might rightly ask, what relevance does this have today? Lipset's famous paper was published almost half a century ago, and the modernization-theoretical approach *à la* Lipset seems to have become obsolete already in the 1980s. One should expect that today it is only of historical interest, if at all.

A closer look reveals, however, that this is not the case. At least two sets of evidence suggest that despite large amounts of scholarship published in the meantime the mainstream of comparative democratization studies has not made as much progress as one should think:

(a) The first batch of evidence is provided by Lipset himself. In 1994, 35 years after the publication of his early paper, he "revisited" his own ideas about the social requisites of democracy. In the course of it, he also reviewed a wealth of more recent studies on the subject by other authors. The result is not very inspiring. To be sure, he points out that the phenomenon of democracy raises an extremely interesting research question when he observes that it is an

"astonishing behavior, not normal, not on the surface a 'rational choice', particularly in new, less stable, less legitimate polities [...] for a person to be willing to give up control because of an election outcome".³²

But for the explanation of this "astonishing" phenomenon he has hardly anything more substantial on offer than in 1959. His insights culminate in the assertion that

"What new democracies need, above all, to attain legitimacy is efficacy – particularly in the economic arena, but also in the polity".³³

This he had already said in 1959, when he also offered more or less the same explanatory reasons, to which he can now add references to

32 Lipset 1994: 2.

33 Ibid.: 17.

a number of statistical correlations found by others which he sees as confirmations of his causal hypothesis. Again, there is also a “methodological note” in which he newly warns against premature generalisations and “futurology” and predicts “inevitable” counterexamples for each considered variable; and yet, he believes that he can „with considerable confidence“ make assertions about a number of factors that are „conducive to the development of democracy“.³⁴ Still, the 1994 paper ends with the prediction:

“Whether democracy succeeds or fails continues to depend significantly on the choices, behaviors, and decisions of political leaders and groups.”³⁵

It seems doubtful that anyone would wish to deny this.

(b) That there is not much progress to be found in Lipset himself, does not imply that such progress was not made elsewhere; after all, Lipset is certainly not the only scholar in comparative democratization studies. But in fact, the subdiscipline seems to me to have been relatively immobile and I want here to sketch the contours of a second batch of evidence for this negative assessment.³⁶

For some years now, a certain “renaissance of modernization theory” has been detected in comparative democracy and particularly so-called transition studies.³⁷ Particularly, Lipset’s old hypothesis about the relationship between economic development and political democracy has – inspired now mainly by the transformation processes in Eastern Europe – returned to the center of attention. Considerable effort has gone into empirical research to confirm, falsify or refine the thesis or to turn it upside down, postulating a causal effect from political democracy to economic development instead, or in addition. What can we say as of today about the results of these efforts?

As Wolfgang Muno (2001) has systematically shown, a substantial number of empirical studies undertaken during the four decades between

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.: 18.

36 For more recent evidence, cf. my analysis of the multiple inadequacies from a scientific point of view, including some “glaring contradictions” of his own, in the best-selling book on the so-called “Third Wave” of democratization by Samuel Huntington, another prominent comparatist with modernization-theoretical leanings (Zimmerling 2003).

37 Cf. Muno 2001: 2, following Boeckh 1992.

1959 and 2000 have not been able to establish any firm significant statistical correlation, and much less a causal relationship, in either direction between democratic and economic development. Although many authors claim to have shown such relationships, the results of the studies vary greatly in comparison despite the fact that there are sometimes only slight differences in the data base and/or the indicators used in each case for the operationalization of the concepts of (socio-)economic development and democracy.³⁸ „Anything goes“ seems to be the most fitting description of this state of affairs: positive, negative and insignificant statistical correlations have all been found. Besides some obvious flaws in research design and a partial lack of data, too much still seems to depend on the subjective interpretation and operationalization of the relevant concepts and the arbitrary inclusion or exclusion of potentially relevant causal factors, not backed by solid, rigorous theorizing.

Thus, the potential effect of economic modernization – or, if you prefer, industrialization, capitalism, or the establishment of a market economy – on the development of democracy has more recently been examined particularly by Larry Diamond (1992), Ingemar Hadenius (1992), Tatu Vanhanen (1997), Teresa Burns (2000) and Adam Przeworski et al. (2000). Diamond claims to be able to sustain the conclusive result that the central tenet of classical modernization theory, that is, Lipset’s old thesis that economic development fosters democracy, is „one of the most powerful and robust relationships in the study of comparative national development“:³⁹

“This review of the evidence more than three decades later has demonstrated that Lipset was broadly correct in his assertion of a strong causal relationship between economic development and democracy and in his explanations of *why* development promotes democracy [...] socioeconomic development promotes democracy in two senses. Where democracy already exists, sustained development contributes significantly to its legitimacy and stability, especially in the early life of the regime. Where democracy does not exist, it leads (sooner or later) to the eventually (if not initially) *successful* establishment of democracy.”⁴⁰

38 Muno provides tables nicely summarizing the findings of 49 studies in the period of 1959–1989 and another 19 studies in the period of 1990–2000; cf. Muno 2001: 15, 19.

39 Diamond 1992: 110, quoted from Muno 2001: 22. Since Muno conveniently quotes a number of the central conclusions from other studies, and reading his paper has reminded me of many of them, and first introduced me to some others, it is not only economical for me but also fair to him to quote from his paper rather than from the respective original sources.

40 Diamond 1992: 125, quoted from Muno 2001: 22.

The other authors, however, come to different conclusions:

“What then, can we say about the requisites of democracy in the part of the world which was examined? It is clear that no single explanatory factor strikes like an iron fist through the material. [...] The conclusion is that differences in terms of socio-economic development in this part of the world are, although not inconsiderable, far from crucial for democracy.”⁴¹

“[The empirical findings] show that although an increased level of political and democratic freedom in a country has the potential to facilitate economic growth, this is only possible in a climate of decreasing income inequality. Increased democratic freedom working simultaneously with increased income inequality stifles, at a statistically significant level, economic growth.”⁴²

“The results of this comparative study [of 172 countries] indicate that it is possible to trace the emergence of democracy to one regular and dominant causal factor, the relative distribution of power resources, although many other factors may also affect the process of democratization.”⁴³

“[I]n sum, modernization theory appears to have little, if any, explanatory power. [...] The most important lesson we have learned is that wealthy countries tend to be democratic not because democracies emerge as a consequence of economic development under dictatorships but because, however they emerge, democracies are much more likely to survive in affluent societies.”⁴⁴

The upshot of these diverging findings has been expressed by Amartya Sen:

„If all the comparative studies are viewed together, the hypothesis that there is no clear relationship between economic growth and democracy in *either* direction remains extremely plausible.“⁴⁵

Hence, even concerning this one question which, as one of the main concerns of development and democratization studies, has received a particularly large amount of research effort, it seems that all we can really claim to know is that we don't really know. And this also applies more generally – at least if we can trust the assessment of Ian Shapiro who

41 Hadenius 1992: 146 f., quoted from Muno 2001: 32.

42 Burns 2000: 23; quoted from Muno 2001: 27.

43 Vanhanen 1997: 155; quoted from Muno 2001: 35.

44 Przeworski et al. 2000: 137; quoted from Muno 2001: 38.

45 Sen 1999: 7; quoted from Muno 2001: 48.

very recently diagnosed “The State of Democratic Theory” to contain little solid knowledge in the form of well-confirmed testable hypotheses about the prerequisites of democracy.⁴⁶

V. Conclusions

It may be understandable that in view of the deficits I have illustrated by way of a few examples a substantial part of the comparative study of democracy that has concentrated mainly on so-called developing countries and their so-called democratic transitions does not enjoy a very good reputation in more OECD-oriented as well as in theoretical circles. However, these are, of course, not defects of the subject as such, but only of the way it is approached, of its theoretical and empirical foundations – defects, that is, which can be overcome.

It seems to me that a promising approach, from which all sides could gain, would be to “bring back together what belongs together”, that is, to reunite in the comparative study of democracy and democratization the investigation of Tocqueville’s and Alberdi’s three bundles of factors: of **institutions, inclinations** and **interventions**. Democratization scholars have, as already mentioned, recently begun to take institutions more seriously; but they are still a long way from taking full advantage, for their empirical studies, of the body of theoretical insights and proposals elaborated, with the help of the analytical tools and modeling devices modern political theory has to offer, in the primarily institution-oriented *political theory of democracy*. And the latter could, in turn, gain from taking seriously the descriptions of the particular circumstances and problems of aspiring, existing, or failed non-OECD democracies, using them to enrich the repertoire of intervening variables and constraints – physical, mental or institutional – they take into account, beyond hy-

46 Shapiro 2003, esp. ch. 4 (“Getting and Keeping Democracy”). Inspired by his review of the pertinent scholarship, Shapiro himself conjectures (ibid.: 87) that the „endurance of Indian democracy against the odds“ may be explained by the fact that „Indian elites were often trained in Oxford and Cambridge“ and thus „may have imbibed commitments to democracy from the English“, whereas African elites usually did not undergo such training, “which perhaps has something to do with why democracies did not generally survive in British ex-colonies there. Perhaps, [...] however“ the causal factors are of an altogether different kind, as he immediately concedes. So what Shapiro depicts as the current state of knowledge concerning democratic prerequisites is a not very helpful “Perhaps – but perhaps not”.

pothetical ideal conditions or the implicitly taken-for-granted conditions of the (mostly, OECD) countries they happen to be familiar with. Finally, the “political sociologists” studying the “core” democracies have much to offer to both groups in terms of knowledge about politics as the interplay of inclinations, and could in return gain from them a renewed awareness that even those aspects of democracy they tend to take for granted are not natural states of affairs, and that even the polities of consolidated OECD democracies leave much to be desired.

Such an integrated institutional theory of democratic institutions⁴⁷ is certainly no easy task – overcoming the current lack of “inter-subdisciplinary” communication requires abolishing language barriers and prejudices before one can even get to the substance of the matter; but it seems interesting, promising and feasible – and therefore desirable. After all, it is to be emphasized that there is a reason why we are so especially interested in the development of democratic as opposed to other kinds of systems. Despite all my earlier criticism, on this I fully agree with Lipset:

“To aid men’s actions in furthering democracy was in some measure Tocqueville’s purpose in studying the operation of American democracy, and it remains perhaps the most important substantive intellectual task which students of politics can still set before themselves.”⁴⁸

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47 On „institutionalism as a method“, cf. Diermeier/Krehbiel 2003 who distinguish between „institutional theories“ and „theories of institutions“ and argue that the latter cannot adequately be developed without the former.

48 Lipset 1959: 103.

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